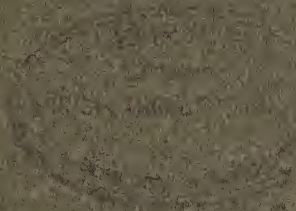


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THE FARM LABOR PROBLEM

The farm labor problem has presented and continues to present many difficulties. It is sufficiently difficult without the added complications which arise from the unrest and apprehension created by the utterances and writings of misinformed and, in some instances, of mischievous persons. Not a few statements are being made which not only are not conducive to a satisfactory solution but which, on the contrary, are responsible for additional unrest and misdirection of effort.

This is one of two or three subjects to which the Department has given more thought than to any others, not only since this country entered the war but for many months prior to that time. There has been before the farmers the question of retaining a sufficient number of year-round skilled laborers and also of meeting the urgent needs at the planting and harvesting periods. In very many sections of the Union difficulties in both directions have been experienced. This has been particularly true of communities where there has been great industrial activity incident to preparations for the Army and Navy. Farmers in the neighborhood of cities where there has been great re-direction of labor and capital, and also where the cantonments and other special enterprises have been under way, have been greatly embarrassed. Obviously, a nation cannot engage in a struggle such as the one which this country is making in defense of its rights and for freedom in the world without disturbances of many kinds, especially of labor, without inconvenience, and without calling for sacrifices from every class of society. Mere complaint will serve no useful purpose. Constructive thought and action alone will help.

In some respects, the situation may not be quite so acute another year. Naturally, the disturbances are much more violent immediately after a great shock has been given the industrial system. This Nation had been organized on a peace basis. When it entered the war, it was necessary not only to create vast additional facilities and machinery, but also to provide on an enormous scale for the operation of the new establishments and of those previously existing. Many shipyards had to be expanded and others had to be created. Large cantonments had to be built, and built quickly. In every direction there were urgent demands for great expansions. Furthermore, it was necessary to have an Army, and this necessarily caused additional labor drains and dislocations. In the haste of the first draft, it was impossible to work out a satisfactory classification of labor with reference to the national needs.

However, it is well to recognize that the situation will continue to be difficult and that a satisfactory solution will require the best thought of the Nation and the fullest and most complete cooperation of all agencies. To this end, all plans which give any promise of real results must be carefully examined and put into effect so far as they are feasible.

That the Department and other agencies of the Government fully appreciate the seriousness of the situation is indicated by the action

taken to attempt to furnish relief. Even under the pressure of the first draft, the War Department held definitely in mind the thought of lightening the burden so far as possible by not calling to the colors those essential for leadership and direction. With the fuller time at its disposal, that Department, which has recognized from the beginning the necessity of not unduly disturbing any essential industry, has worked out a system of classification of the men subject to the draft which contemplates the placing of skilled farm labor engaged in necessary agricultural enterprises in class 2, assistant or associate managers of necessary agricultural enterprises in class 3, and heads of necessary agricultural enterprises in class 4. The operation of this new arrangement should remove many of the difficulties previously encountered and, in reasonable measure, meet the demands of the situation.

Several months before we entered the war, the Government was giving the farm labor situation definite attention. In former years, the Department of Agriculture, in cooperation with the Department of Labor, sought to render, and did render, assistance to farmers in a number of States in securing seasonal labor. In conjunction with State agencies, these Departments have effected the transfer of considerable numbers of laborers from communities where the load had passed to others where the need was urgent. This was done especially in the years of large production and, in some cases, from 20,000 to 40,000 laborers were transferred to particular States.

After the entry of the United States into the war, the thought of the Department of Agriculture, in connection with the Department of Labor, was very definitely directed to the problem of farm labor. The matter was thoroughly discussed at the conference held in St. Louis on April 9 and 10 with the agricultural representatives of the various States. It was also referred to in my letter to the Senate of April 18, 1917.

One of the first steps taken by the Department of Agriculture was to select and station in each State, in touch with the State agencies, the best available man the Department could secure (1) to make surveys of farm labor conditions; (2) to bring about fuller cooperation in the utilization of labor among farmers in the same community; (3) to assist in shifting labor from one community or one State to another; and (4) to bring into service kinds of labor not heretofore fully or regularly employed in farming operations, such as boys of high school age who knew something about farming, and to do many other things. After the Food Production Bill was passed on August 10, an allotment of nearly \$100,000 was made to extend and develop the work of the Department in this direction. Only recently the Department held a conference in St. Louis of its farm labor representatives and of State agencies cooperating with them to consider the work which had been done up to that time and to formulate more efficient plans for the future. Some hint of the activities of the Department along this line is given in my annual report for 1917.

Some persons seem to be promoting the suggestion that farmers as a class should be exempted from military service and that no person from this class should be permitted to serve in the Army, and criticism has resulted because it has not been acted upon. It would be unfair to the farmers of the Nation even to entertain the thought that they

would be willing to have the rest of the population do all the fighting in this struggle in the defense of our rights and for world freedom. The farmers themselves as a whole would resent the intimation. If farmers were exempted as a class, obviously others would feel the injustice of such action. It is unlikely that any responsible body of opinion would sanction the proposal.

If we put our minds to the task and attempt to deal with it in a constructive way, there are many things which can be done to furnish relief. The Department of Agriculture, of course, will continue to do everything in its power to aid in the solution of the difficult problem. The most promising lines of effort seem to me to embrace the following:

First. A systematic survey of the farm labor situation in order to ascertain the possible needs of farmers and to determine ways of meeting them. The Department, before the beginning of the next crop season, through its agents stationed in the various States and in co-operation with the Department of Labor and the State councils of defense, will make such a survey.

Second. The promotion of fuller cooperation in the utilization of labor among farmers in the same community.

Third. The further development of machinery for assisting in the transfer of labor from sections where the seasonal pressure has passed to regions where additional help is urgently needed.

Fourth. Making available labor which heretofore has not been fully or regularly utilized in farming operations, including boys of high school age who have had experience on the farm.

The farm labor representatives of the Department will continue to devote all their time and energies to these tasks and they will keep in close touch with appropriate State and other agencies.

Fifth. The releasing of men for agricultural purposes, so far as possible, by replacing them with women and by diverting labor from relatively nonessential enterprises are matters which demand serious consideration. Conscription of labor for industrial purposes, of course, necessarily would present many difficulties. Powerful influences are operating, however, to bring about the release of labor and capital from less essential enterprises and their diversion into more urgent undertakings. These will become increasingly compelling as the situation develops. They will be aided by the growing realization on the part of the people generally of curtailing expenditures on nonessentials and of redirecting labor and capital into vital industries.

Sixth. Steps to see that any able-bodied men who are not now doing a full and useful day's work shall be fully and regularly employed. This, of course, is a matter primarily for consideration by State and municipal authorities.

Seventh. The largest possible production and fullest use of farm labor-saving machinery. The Department has actively interested itself in securing priority for raw materials used in the manufacture of farm implements, and also in securing favorable consideration at the hands of transportation committees to provide facilities for moving the materials to the manufacturers and the completed products from the manufacturers to the distributors and also to the farmers. Both those dealing with priorities of materials and those dealing with priorities of transportation have evinced a complete willingness to assist. This is indicated by the fact that the priorities committee of

the War Industries Board gave raw materials needed for farm implements a position of preference over all articles except those urgently required for military and naval purposes, and that the transportation committee took steps to secure the prompt movement of the raw materials and of the manufactured articles. This matter is still receiving the earnest attention of the Department with a view to see what further action can be taken to make certain that an adequate supply will be available at reasonable prices.

If there are any other fruitful and practicable lines of effort which will aid in the solution of the problem, they should, of course, be followed. The Department has been in constant touch not only with representative farmers and farmers' organizations but also has had frequent contact with the State commissioners of agriculture and the experts of the land-grant colleges. It receives many hundreds of letters daily containing all sorts of suggestions from many parts of the country. As has been indicated, it has special machinery throughout the Union for the purpose of receiving suggestions and furnishing assistance.

Many plans are proposed which are utterly impracticable, but any constructive suggestion always has received and will continue to receive the most careful consideration. The whole subject, involving industry as well as agriculture, is being given serious attention by the Council of National Defense through its various agencies which are actively at work along many lines to formulate constructive plans.

D. F. Houston
Secretary.



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